



TIPS FOR ENGAGING WITH MIDDLE SCHOOLERS

Below are tips and suggestions for engaging with middle schoolers, as well as links if you'd like to read more. These tips are applicable to a classroom teacher, a guest speaker presenting to a large group, and an out-of-school mentor. They might not fit exactly with your setting, but they can often be adapted to be helpful.

Four secret keys to student engagement:

- » Clarity—What am I asking students to do?
- » Context—Why is it important?
- » Culture—How do I show my support?
- » Challenge—How do I balance challenge and skill?

Engaging with middle school students:

Quotes below from veteran, beloved middle school teachers.

- » “Kids don’t care what you know until they know you care,” –Rocky B.
 - You might be tempted to pass all of your knowledge on to your students, but if they’re not listening, it’s going to get lost. Plus, teens and tweens can naturally be a little skeptical, so look for your own way to show them that you really do care.
- » “You have to come to their level and understand them.” –Leslie G.
 - It’s important to speak to them in a language they understand and that they want to hear. You have a role as an authority figure in the classroom, but you also have to offer friendship to connect.
- » “You have to be able to grab their attention, and you have to know them in order to do this.” –Denise S.
 - Once you know what your students find interesting, entertaining, and funny, you can then figure out how to use those things to really grab their attention. For groups, this might mean pop culture references or trends. But if you’re trying to reach an individual student, take notice of what they’re into to show another level of engagement.
- » “Love your students, and they will conquer the world.” –Marie J.
 - Kids of all ages know when an adult is being sincere. Teachers agree that if you show your students you really and truly care, then they trust you. Then you can reach them in whole new ways. Janine N. writes, “Love, listen, validate their feelings, and stretch them to grow and believe in themselves and appreciate others.”
- » “I love to get down on the floor with my students. I talk to them about travel or just life issues.” –Valerie O.
 - You definitely develop a whole new relationship with students once you share candid, honest moments. Be brave and be that person who goes out on a limb with your students.

Bringing STEM Guest Speakers into the classroom

- » “Guest speakers can dig into their particular perspective about what the world of STEM is actually like, what their career paths looked like, and offer insightful counsel for “I wish I knew this about STEM” woes.”

Giving Presentations in Middle Schools: Best Practices:

- » Middle school students have amazing energy and are very social animals. That being said, they may not respond to your questions initially as they do not want to appear too eager or uninformed to their peers. On the other hand, some students may disrupt your presentation by commanding too much attention. Work out a system to ask for help from the teacher if this happens.
- » Middle school students are often hesitant to be asked questions to answer near the beginning of your talk. You can engage students to answer questions initially with a simple “thumbs up or thumbs down” if they have experienced certain things or think an answer is true or false. They will warm up once they get more familiar with you and your content.
- » Begin your presentation by spending about 5 minutes telling students about yourself and your job. You might want to include a few slides or images that describe your work in fairly simple terms. Middle school students will also be interested in the type of education that you need to get into your position, so you may want to talk a bit about the kinds of classes and interests that helped you get into your position. Other things to cover include: what got you interested in your field in the first place? What are some neat experiences you have had? Do you travel for work?



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Asking open-ended questions to encourage engagement

- » An **open-ended question** is a question that requires a full answer using the subject's own knowledge or feelings. These questions are objective, do not lead the person being asked, and result in an answer that requires an explanation.

- Open-ended questions or statements begin with the following words: why, how, what, describe, explain, tell me about..., or what do you think about...

Examples:

- Describe your favorite part of the project...
- Tell me about something that was difficult with programming the temperature sensor...
- What are you most proud of with your sensor work right now?
- How could you add to what you are doing?
- Could you explain more about what you just said?
- I hear that you are stuck on ... What have you tried to get unstuck?

- » A **closed-ended question** can be answered in a short or single-word answer. They are used to obtain facts and specific pieces of information but often kill a conversation.

- If you want to avoid closed-ended questions, do not start questions with the following verbs: are/was, did/do, will, won't, didn't, aren't, would, if

Examples:

- Did you get the sensor to work?
- Was it fun?

- » **Try funneling questions.** If you are struggling to get the person to open up with broad, open-ended questions, try narrowing the questions first and then making them broader after getting them into the conversation.

- Start with questions with a narrow focus, then transition to broad and open detail-type questions.
- An example of this would be when talking to your kids. You might ask a question like, "What happened in STEM class today?" "Nothing" is the response. Follow up with something like, "What are you trying to get the sound sensor to do?" More than likely, this will spark a conversation.

- » **Use open-ended questions as follow-ups for other questions.** When someone has finished talking, ask them an open-ended question that refers to what they just said or is related to what they just said. This keeps the conversation flowing in an open and engaging way.

- Ask "why" and "how" to follow up and gain a lengthier answer after asking a closed-ended question.

Examples:

- How could you add to what you are doing?
- I heard you say.... Can you tell me more about that?
- Why do you think that happened?

- » **Make sure to listen and allow enough wait time for students to formulate answers.**

- Sometimes we are guilty of formulating the next question without paying attention to the answer to the first. You miss great opportunities for follow-up questions if you do this.
- It's okay to allow for somewhat "uncomfortable silence" as you give students time to think. Wait time of up to 10 seconds will feel like an eternity, but it is totally worth it!

Additional resources

<https://www.wikihow.com/Ask-Open-Ended-Questions>